

*The name's Moonlight. Jonny Moonlight. I was standing on the corner of the street, the collar of my trench coat pulled up, my trilby pulled down to shade my eyes from the pallid light coming from the street lamp. The smoke from the cigarette in my mouth curled up into the still night air. I shifted my weight from one foot to another. I wasn't impatient, although I had been waiting for some time. I had done this kind of thing a thousand times before. I was experienced and I knew she would come sooner or later.*

"Wait a minute. You're trying to set up the beginning of a story here, right?"

"Well spotted. Though I thought there were quite a lot of clues there"

"Like what?"

"Well, the fact that it's the first page and there is a title above it, to start with."

"But there are others aren't there? I mean, you're trying to be mysterious. Not telling us who he's waiting for. And you're trying to place it in time. I mean the cigarette, the trilby, the trench coat. They all tend to date it back to, say, the forties. And I can see the shape of that street lamp in my mind's eye. The whole scene, it's sort of like an Edward Hopper painting."

"Well done, Sherlock. That makes you just about an average reader. Now can we get back to it?"

*I continued waiting and then I moved into the shadow, prompted by something moving, just out of sight. I stood a little straighter, more alert. I had one hand in my pocket, and the other lodged loosely between the lapels of my coat. I didn't have a gun, but I didn't want anyone getting the wrong idea. Then she came into view. She was tall and slim with long, perfectly waved hair. Her collar was up, as if to protect her from, well, who knows what. Her figure was emphasised by the fact that she was wearing high heels and her coat was cinched tight around her waist. She was a classic, I thought, another Rita Hayworth.*

"Who?"

"So, smart-ass, you know all about Edward Hopper, but you've never heard of Rita Hayworth. She was married to Orson Welles, among others. You must have heard of him. Or how about Lana Turner, or Betty Grable, or even Marilyn."

"Are they all from the same period? Are you sure you've got the dates

right?"

"It doesn't much matter. We're talking stereotypes here. No-one's going to check."

*She came and stood in front of me. Looked me up and down. Cool. Paused, then said,*

*"You must be Johnny Moonlight?"*

*"If you insist."*

*"OK, wise guy. I need help." She wasn't going to take any lip from me*

*"I figured that."*

*I'm smart like that. I'm a private eye. People only come to me when they need help, although she didn't look very helpless.*

*"Is there somewhere we can talk?"*

*"Right here not good enough for you?"*

*The fact that she hadn't wanted to come to my office made me wonder why we needed to be so secretive.*

*She started to explain slowly at first, then gradually gained confidence as she told her story. She was married to a well-known film producer, a big shot (now, there's a surprise). It was a name we've all heard of. He was a big noise in town. I should have recognised her, but I don't move in those kind of circles, and I don't have much time for the movies. She was worried about her younger sister. Thought she might be in trouble with the mob. She'd been acting kind of suspicious. But sis wouldn't talk to her. So, she wanted me to find out what was going on. She hadn't wanted to come to my office because it's on Main Street and it's a bit too public. If she'd been going into the office of a private dick, it would have hit the cover of Movie Highlights before your eyes had recovered from the flash bulb. It was at this point that she burst into tears.*

"So she's the mystery, the love interest and the poor little helpless woman all rolled into one. That's a bit corny isn't it? I'm surprised you haven't called her a 'dame' yet"

"I told you, we're dealing in stereotypes here. And anyway, you must have known what you were getting into before you started. Didn't you look at the picture on the cover before you started? I mean that's pretty clichéd.

But don't blame me for that. It was out of my hands. Y'know the publisher and all that."

*I took my hand from between my lapels and she started as I did so. She must have been used to people pulling heaters from their jackets.*

"Calm down, sister. It's only a note book. I need some details."

*I took them down. Told her what it would cost and said I would be in touch in a couple of days. She clacked away down the pavement, while I stood and admired the view. Then I strolled back to my office, opened the file cabinet and got out the bourbon. A great servant, but a lousy master, the booze. Fortunately, I managed to keep the right end of the leash. I started to do some thinking. I went to the phone book and got going with that.*

"Hey, you haven't described his office."

"Do I need to? You got the file cabinet, the trench coat, the bourbon. I bet you even visualised the bent-wood coat stand he hung his hat and coat on, the slightly dilapidated leather topped desk, the green-shaded, table top lamp and the overstuffed leather armchair in the corner. Oh, and the name in reverse gold lettering on the frosted glass on the door. Am I right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

*There were some pretty swanky addresses that started jumping out at me. I needed to take a drive to take a look. So, I got up from the dilapidated leather topped desk, turned off the green-shaded table top lamp, pushed the overstuffed armchair into the corner, got my hat and coat off the stand and walked through the door which had "Jonny Moonlight Private Investigations" etched in gold letters on the outside of the frosted glass.*

*I went down to my car. It was a '51 Plymouth, pretty non-descript, but I liked it that way. It did the job without attracting too much attention.*

"So, it's not a hot rod and we're not going to see a car chase then?"

"Hey you know your cars. Pretty good. Just bumped yourself up to above average."

"So, are we?"

"Doesn't seem likely at this stage, does it? But you never know. He could have a secret, special Corvette tucked away for high days and holidays"

*I started by going up to the Heights. Just to get a feel for what these places looked like from outside, because, sure as shooting, I wasn't going to get inside without an invite.*

*"Sure as shooting? That's a bit John Wayne isn't it?"*

*"Now who's dealing in stereotypes?"*

*And I was right. High walls. Iron gates. Entry systems, even the occasional dog and sometimes a mutt with a bulging jacket. I drove through the district. Not so slow as to arouse suspicion, but not too fast. I wanted to get the lie of the land.*

*Then having scoped out the dame's place, I went to the sister's address. A little more modest, but not much. She either had her own income, or her big sister was generous with the birthday presents. It was a condo, but not one I could afford. I parked and waited. And waited. And waited. If you want to find out what people are doing, you have to wait for them to show you. They ain't gonna tell you.*

*It was dark when she came out. She was a doll. Must have been about 20, 21. And like her sister, she was a real looker. They were obviously bred from some good stock. She came out of the door of the block, which was opened by the commissionaire. Whose eyes followed her down the steps. The same way mine did. But with less professional interest.*

*As she reached the bottom, a black Caddy pulled up and the door opened. She got in and it pulled away, And so did I. We convoyed down town to a club called the Black Box. It was the kind of club with purple ropes outside, with a couple of apes to swing on them. Which tells you a lot about who's inside.*

*"You've slowed up a bit, we need a bit of action.*

*"Yeah I guess you're right. Let's try this."*

*I parked and approached the door of the club, looked straight in the eye of the biggest ape, flashed a badge at him and mumbled something that sounded like "Police Officer" and walked straight past him. It worked nine times out of ten.*

*"You're kidding me! That only works in the movies."*

*"Well, that's what this'll be when I sell the rights."*

*The club was dark, but she would light up any room. I saw her immediately, and also saw who she was with. Not good news. He was not a man to be trifled with.*

*At that moment, it all went black.*

*"You do do the clichés, don't you?"*

*"Hey listen, I'm working against a word limit here. You have to use some shortcuts."*

*I came to in the back of the club among the crates and kegs. Standing over me was a gorilla in a dinner suit with a baseball bat in his hand.*

*"OK wise guy. You gonna tell us what you 're doing here?"*

*Not really a question so I didn't bother to answer. Besides, that was the second time I'd been called wise guy in the space of a few hours and I didn't like it. I didn't take too kindly to being hit on the head either. I tried to stand up and at that moment the sister walked in.*

*"My sister hired you, didn't she?"*

*I looked at her, which was an easy thing to do, she was pretty easy to look at.*

*"Well, didn't she?"*

*"If you know so much, why are you asking?"*

*"I want to know what she wants."*

*"Well, why don't you ask her."*

*I felt that this sister-sister relationship was going round in circles, like my head.*

*I tried again to stand up but the gorilla pushed me back on the crates. My head was thumping and I needed a drink and I was damned if I was going to tell these punks anything.*

*"Alright that's it. This story is going nowhere."*

*"What do you mean? We've only just started."*

*"Look you're 1500 words into it and there's a bit of mystery, but not really enough to hold me. I'm off to try somewhere else."*

*The stranger got down from his horse, looped the reins round the hitching post,*

*adjusted his gun belt and strolled through the bat-wing doors into the saloon. As the doors swung closed behind him, the piano player stopped and the few people in the bar turned to look at him. He heard someone whisper,*

*"It's the Fargo kid."*

*He walked up to the bar and nodded to the bar keep.*

*"Whisky."*

*The bar keep poured a shot with shaking hands.*

*"Christ this is worse than the other one. Another set of clichés and shouldn't whiskey be spelt with an E?"*

*"Oh no! Not you again."*